

Running Head: WHAT IS FEMINISM, WHO IS FEMINIST?

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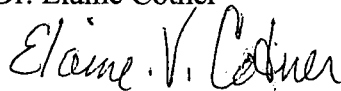
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elaine V. Cotner".

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"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat, or a prostitute."

—Rebecca West, 1913

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Abstract

Most women will agree that gender equity is, to some degree, important to them. Much more difficult is getting the majority of women to confess that they are feminists. The purpose of this project is to provide a modern definition of feminism that is non-discriminatory and encompasses all of the basic tenants of feminism. The beginning of this study will focus on the history of the women's movement, because understanding the history of feminism is an important part of understanding modern feminism. Next, the different types of feminism will be examined in order to show the wide array of feminist beliefs and the variety of attitudes feminists hold. The third section will focus on men in the women's movement to dispel the myth that feminism is anti-male and that men are not involved in the movement. The fourth section will focus on the myths and misconceptions of feminism. The last section will be used to analyze several different definitions of feminism in order to create a broad, all-encompassing definition of modern feminism.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to study the history of feminism, the different types of feminism, the myths of feminism, and several different definitions of feminism in order to develop a broad, all-encompassing definition of modern feminism for today's feminists. The beginning of this study will focus on the American women's movement, including the first, second, and third waves of feminism. It is important to understand the causes and the history of the women's movement in order to understand feminism in general. The majority of the research presented in this paper is on American feminism because feminists outside the United States may have different beliefs and goals for women in their culture. The second part of this study will focus on different types of feminism in America. It is important to analyze as many aspects of feminism as possible in order to create the most inclusive definition of feminism possible. Next, myths about feminism will be discussed. Feminists are up against stereotypes that persuade people to stay out of the movement for fear of being labeled a feminist. However, one goal of this essay is to convince the reader that calling oneself feminist can be an empowering act when the individual understands what feminism truly is. In the final section of this study, many different definitions of feminism will be discussed and analyzed in order to create a modern definition of feminists and their beliefs. This is the most important part of the study because it defines the true nature of the feminist ideology. The purpose of this essay is to assist people in understanding that feminism is viable and necessary in the modern world. A further purpose of this study is to encourage people who believe in the goals of feminism to identify themselves as feminists.

Background

To begin a discussion on the meaning of feminism, it is important to understand the history of the American women's rights movement. A look at where feminists began and where they are headed in the future is a crucial aspect of understanding the causes, effects, and motivations for feminists yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer, is often credited with the birth of feminist thought. Her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, was written in 1792 and shortly made it over the ocean and into the hands of American women. At about the time Wollstonecraft's book arrived in America, women in the United States were beginning their fight for freedom. Interestingly, the American women's movement grew out of the anti-slavery movement of the early 1800s. As abolitionists shifted from defining slavery in terms of an economic issue to a moral issue, women became more and more involved. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the founders of the American women's movement, was deeply involved in the abolitionist movement in the mid 1800s. In 1840, on her honeymoon, Stanton's husband took her to the World-Antislavery Convention in London. Much to her dismay, Stanton was not permitted to attend the meeting because she was a woman. While this was a disheartening experience for Stanton, it enabled her to network with other women the convention rejected, such as Lucretia Mott. At the conclusion of the London convention, Stanton and Mott resolved to hold their own convention on the rights of women once they returned home. In July 1848 Stanton and Mott hosted the Seneca Falls Convention, finally giving American women a forum in which to discuss their social, civil, and political issues with one another (Wellman, 2004). At the Seneca Falls Convention the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments was drafted. This document, based on the United States Declaration of Independence, pronounced that women should be equal to men before the law, including suffrage. So began the

first wave of the American women's movement. The Seneca Falls Convention opened the eyes and minds of many American women. Suddenly, women began to understand that women all over the country were dealing with similar problems. All at once the personal became the political (an idea that will be discussed later in this text). Women realized that their inequality, isolation, and lack of opportunity were rooted in cultural patterns and America's social structure.

In 1865 the 13th amendment was passed abolishing slavery in the United States. Soon afterward in 1868, the 14th amendment was passed, guaranteeing that all citizens, including African-American males, had the right to vote. Female abolitionists and suffragists were convinced that this was the most opportune time to campaign for the woman's right to vote. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the foremost leaders in this first wave of American feminism. Stanton spoke in favor of suffrage in her newspaper, *Revolution*, saying "it will secure for women equal place and equal wages in the world of work; that it will open women to schools, colleges, professions and all the opportunities and advantages of life" (*Revolution*, 1868, as cited in O'Neill, 1989, pp. 126). Many suffragists felt giving women the right to vote would completely revolutionize American society. They vowed,

when women get the vote, miracles will happen. Politics will suddenly be purified, and society itself will be elevated to lofty levels. Political leaders, in the interest of gaining feminine support, will pass laws beneficial to humanity. Women's participation in the body politic will be an immeasurable boon to society (Sochen, 1974, pp. 84).

While the right to vote would not prove to change the status of American women overnight, suffrage was necessary for women to be able to gain full citizenship. Without the right to vote they were officially second-class citizens. Further, "rights and obligations are reciprocal elements of citizenship; so long as married women were understood to owe their entire

obligation to their husbands, they could make no claims of rights against the political community” (Kerber, Kessler-Harris, & Sklar, 1995, page 23).

In 1869 Stanton organized and presided over the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) along with a fellow suffragette, Susan B. Anthony. Stanton and Anthony had worked together previously, founding the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1853 and the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) in 1866. The aim of the WCTU was to limit the sale of liquor in the United States by petitioning the legislature. However, there was resounding silence from the legislators who read the petition because all of the signatures came from women. Anthony concluded that without the right to vote, women would not be able to influence policy (O’Neill, 1989; Shaw & Lee, 2007). One step towards achieving that right would have been to include more women in high-office positions. The first time this was talked about was when Victoria Woodhull ran for president in 1872.

Victoria Woodhull first appeared on the feminist scene in 1868 when she and her sister began publishing *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*, a periodical devoted to the promotion of feminism, suffrage, and spiritualism. By 1871 Woodhull had risen in the ranks of American feminists and spoke before the House Judiciary Committee to argue that under the 14th amendment, women had the constitutional right to vote. The 14th amendment clarified the meaning of “citizen of the United States” to include all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and Woodhull asserted that this definition included women. Moreover, according to Woodhull, if women are citizens, they should have the right to vote. The committee listened to her proposal but did not agree to amend women’s right to suffrage at that time. In 1872 Victoria Woodhull ran for President of the United States with the support the NWSA. However, due to Woodhull’s public belief in free love and outward support of legalized prostitution, she could not

rally the support needed to get on the ballot (Rosen, 2006; O'Neill, 1989). America would not see another female candidate running for the presidency until the second wave of the women's movement.

In the years following Woodhull's run for presidency, several important events occurred. In 1882 the House of Representatives and the Senate appointed the Select Committees on Woman Suffrage. The committee's purpose was to consider the amendment that would grant American women the right to vote. This amendment was first proposed to Congress in 1878, and it saw much opposition from politicians and the American people. In 1910, The National Association Opposed to Women's Suffrage (NAOWS) was created in New York by Josephine Dodge. The NAOWS organized under the belief that if women were given the right to vote, they would be influenced by party politics, thereby stunting their ability to be truly effective community organizers (an incredibly important niche for most feminists at the time). Other, non-political, anti-suffragists committed their efforts to educating women and legislators on the "cult of true womanhood" (piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness) and their belief that the home is where a woman is most needed (Shaw & Lee, 2006; Fugate, n.d.). Both the NAOWS and the Select Committees on Woman Suffrage were disbanded when suffrage was granted to women by the 19th amendment in 1920.

Feminists did not disappear following the passage of the 19th amendment; however, feminism lost much of its appeal to the public. Many people, women among them, assumed equality was achieved when suffrage passed, but people remained generally uneducated about the true human significance of women's rights. This is evidenced by the fact that women showed up to the polls in small numbers in the 1920s. Additionally, women continued to hold few positions of political power at the local, state, or national level. With a general lack of support

from male policy makers, this led to little actual change for women at the legislative level. Further, women were not granted equal rights under the 19th amendment, only the right to vote. So, they continued to suffer from inequality, discrimination, and oppression at home and in the public sphere (Sochen, 1974; Matthews, 2003). Feminists who continued to stay active in the women's movement were not unanimous as to which course they should take. Some felt the movement should begin to focus on reproductive rights and contraception. However, many felt those issues were too divisive, and shied away from them. Many feminists thought that a social-reform agenda should be adhered to in order to fight for the rights of underprivileged women and children. Some felt that specific equality issues should be dealt with (wage equity, educational opportunities, etc), while others envisioned an equal rights amendment which could stamp out legal gender inequality in one fell swoop (Matthews, 2003).

Alice Paul, an extremely influential member of the suffrage movement, proposed that an equal rights amendment would solve the problem of gender inequality still facing women after they won the right to vote. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), drafted by Paul, was first proposed to Congress in December 1923. The original wording of the document was, "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every other place subject to its jurisdiction" (Matthews, 2003, page 169). The amendment was introduced in every session of Congress until the Senate and the House of Representatives passed it with the required two-thirds vote in 1972. The ERA was sent to the states for ratification that same year, but when the deadline for ratification arrived in 1982, only 35 of the 38 states needed for ratification had signed the amendment (Francis, n.d.). As of this writing, signatures from three states are needed to pass the ERA, which is still not part of the U.S. Constitution. Today, the only right the Constitution specifically sanctions as equal for men and women is the right to vote. Women in

America need the ERA to pass so that the principal of equality is written into the framework of our government (Paul, 1923 as cited in Francis, n.d.). The most important effect of the ERA would be “to clarify the status of gender discrimination for the courts, whose decisions still show confusion about how to deal with such claims. For the first time in American history, ‘sex’ will be a suspect classification like race” (Shaw & Lee, 2007, page 617). Many people assume the continuity of women’s rights. Some even feel that we no longer need federal legislation for equality, such as the ERA, because there are piecemeal federal and state laws to deal with gender discrimination. However, without the ERA, Congress can replace the women’s equality laws that have been enacted, thereby reversing the progress feminists have worked for and gained in the past 150 years. Without the ERA, women in America will continue to fight political and judicial battles to ensure their rights are constitutionally equal to a man’s. This struggle would be eased by the ERA because the amendment would provide a benchmark against which all other laws could be examined to ensure that new laws do not discriminate against any person based on their sex (Francis, n.d.). This amendment would benefit men, women, and transgendered people as evidenced by the language of the amendment.

First wave feminists were focused primarily on establishing legal clout for women in America, specifically by attaining suffrage. The second wave of feminists targeted a wider range of issues including unofficial inequalities, legal inequalities, employment and family issues, and sexuality and reproductive rights. The second phase of the women’s movement, often called the women’s liberation movement, began in the 1960s. Interestingly, this phase began in similar fashion to the first wave, women began working for the civil rights of African-Americans and then created their own movement. Women got involved in the civil rights movement because they felt that in a movement fighting for equality, their inequality would be recognized and

acknowledged, but it wasn't (Sochen, 1974). In the mid-1960s women in organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, a prominent organization in the struggle for black rights) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS, a new-left student organization) were increasingly dissatisfied with their role in these organizations and the organization's unwillingness to discuss the "woman issue". In 1965, Mary King and Casey Hayden wrote a memo to forty females in different movements describing the gap between the new-left's ideal of equality and the sex-caste system that keeps women in subordinate positions (Davis, 1991; King & Hayden, 1965 as cited in King, n.d.). King and Hayden's memo sparked a flame in some female activists that ignited the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s. Women began to organize their own movement in the mid-1960s by creating women's groups and organizations to advocate for the equality of women.

In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed with the intention to "take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, assuming all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men" (NOW, 2009, para. 10). Due to lack of support for the ERA and the sex-caste system that King and Hayden described, women needed a non-governmental organization that that could pressure the government from the outside, as an independent movement (Rosen, 2006). Betty Friedan was elected the first president of NOW and seven task forces were established: Equal Opportunity of Employment; Legal and Political Rights; Education; Women in Poverty; The Family; Image of Women; and Women and Religion (NOW, 1999). Rifts in NOW inevitably formed; after all, it would be almost impossible to speak for *all* women through just one organization. For example, the issue of abortion caused an immense schism in the organization. This led to the creation of the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), a conservative women's rights organization that

decided to focus on equal opportunities for women in employment and education instead of focusing on sexuality and other “personal” women’s issues. A further example of alienation within NOW occurred with lesbian members of the organization. Friedan labeled their sexuality the “lavender menace” of the women’s movement, which left lesbians feeling isolated within NOW. Friedan feared their presence in the organization as representatives of the movement because she assumed that if people started equating lesbianism with the organization it would place an unnecessary taboo on NOW members. Friedan also thought that if people saw the organization as supportive or encouraging of homosexuality it would prevent potential members from joining NOW. Many lesbians left NOW as a result (Rosen, 2006).

New York Radical Women (NYRW), a group founded in 1967, was initially ignored by groups like NOW because of their means to the end of sexual discrimination. While NOW focused on political organization and changing social policy, radical feminist groups concentrated on personal awareness of women’s issues through activities like consciousness-raising (CR), a process by which women could explore the political aspects of their personal lives. CR provided a forum for women to discuss their internalized oppression and their basic assumptions about themselves as women (Davis, 1991). The aim of CR was to allow women to understand that their feelings of insecurity and their lack of opportunities were due to society’s view of women as the lesser sex. Radical feminists attempted to make women see the world through a woman’s eyes, instead of through the “male” eyes that society gave them. Women achieved this by questioning the “natural” order of society. Suddenly, things that seemed normal appeared artificially created to keep women in a place of subordination (Rosen, 2006). Women began to realize that society created their inequality, not nature. For example, women might be asked “If you were to have a child, would you rather have a boy or girl?” They may also be

asked, “What is your dream job, and why?”, or “What makes a woman attractive?” By going through these and many other kinds of questions they would begin to realize what perceptions they had about themselves, and where those ideas and attitudes came from. Many women that were depressed or disillusioned before CR were angry afterwards. Once they realized that media images, sexist jokes, and political legislation were being used against them to promote sexism, they saw enemies everywhere. On the other hand, in the company of other educated women (women that participated in CR), many feminists felt exhilarated that other women shared their tribulations, and that what they thought was a personal inadequacy was instead institutional and cultural discrimination (Rosen, 2006).

Gloria Steinem, an ardent advocate of CR, was a major figure in the second wave women’s movement. As a journalist she covered many news stories that affected her as a woman. The most influential was an abortion speak-out organized by the Redstockings, a New York radical feminist group. At the event, Steinem was moved by women speaking out about their personal experiences with abortion and the discrimination they felt afterwards. At that moment, Steinem realized that she was a feminist. For the next several years, Steinem began writing, lecturing, and campaigning for women’s rights. In the early 1970’s Steinem decided to create a feminist magazine for women as “female human beings...not for wives, mothers, lovers, workers, or professionals, but as people” (*Ms. A statement of purpose*, 1972 as cited in Stern, 1997, pp. 201). The magazine’s first issue was an irrefutable success, selling out in just 8 days. The next issue came out 3 months later and was equally well received. This magazine provided the women’s movement with a tool for consciousness raising at the national level (Rosen, 2006). Over the years, the magazine has dealt with family life, marriage, money, careers, dating, health, domestic violence, oppression, faith, and almost every other topic that is related to women. Ms.

was incredibly well received by most women, conservative homemakers and radical feminists alike. Through the magazine, Steinem attempted to garner support for equality issues that were not perceived as issues at the time, and greatly succeeded at providing a forum for women's rights (Steinem, 1983). Today, *Ms.* continues to report on national and global women's issues in order to educate and to influence its readers to take political action on issues that involve women's rights.

One specific issue that *Ms.* Magazine has dealt with over the years is contraception use and reproductive rights. The issue of reproductive rights was explosive during the second wave. As they did to NOW, the issues of abortion and contraception proved to be a divisive factor in the second wave women's movement. It is important to note, the fight for reproductive rights has always been a struggle for women. From the 1870s to present day, American women, and women all over the world, have been fighting for control over their reproductive selves. However, during the 1960s and 70s birth control became much more controversial than in previous years. This could be due to the fact that during this era, reproductive rights "became an arena for conflict between liberal and conservative ideas about family, personal freedom, state intervention, religion in politics, sexual morality, and social welfare" (Gordon, 2002, pp. 295). Another reason why reproductive rights were so controversial in the 1960s was because prior to 1960 most methods of birth control were for males, and the pill gave women more control in the reproductive process. Reproductive rights affect all people, in many different ways, and during the second-wave people began to understand that they must take a side on this issue, or risk their rights being taken away. Margaret Sanger, an activist for birth control rights, said, "Feminists believe that the government does not have the right to legislate morality", and this is hardly more true than when talking about reproductive rights (Sochen, 1974, pp. 271). Second wave feminists

believed, as feminists today do, that the government's place is not to legislate what is right or wrong. The role of the government should be to keep citizens safe and to give them the freedom to make decisions based on their own values. Most liberals and feminists believe that birth control is equal to women's rights, individual freedom, and family planning, while anti-feminists and conservatives generally agree that birth control is about the destruction of sexual and family morality. Abortion was another divisive issue in the 70s. However, before *Roe v. Wade* there was little public opposition or acceptance of abortion; it was not until after abortion was legalized that it became so controversial (Caron, 2008; Gordon, 2002; Davis, 1991). The 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* established that a woman could abort her pregnancy until the point at which the fetus becomes 'viable' (a viable fetus can only be aborted if the mother's health is in danger, as set forth in *Doe v. Bolton*). Legalization of this practice was an important step towards providing safe abortions for those women who chose to undergo the procedure. Before *Roe v. Wade* abortions were available, mostly to upper- and middle-class women who could afford them. However, women that could not afford the expensive procedure had to rely on practitioners "who at best might cut safety corners and keep prices high and at worst might assault and humiliate them" (Gordon, 2002, pp. 299). Feminists saw the legalization of abortion as an important step towards an increase in safety regulations for women who chose to get an abortion, and an increase in acceptance of women who chose to get an abortion. Feminists do not support abortion or encourage women to get abortions. However, feminists do support the right of women to choose what is best for their lives and their bodies. If a woman chooses to have an abortion, feminists assert that she has the right to a safe procedure and respectful doctors. Essentially, feminists believe that women have the right to choose if they

want to be mothers, and that motherhood should not be forced upon women who are not, financially or emotionally, ready for children.

Second-wave feminists also fought for economic equality for women. For instance, feminists advocated for the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act which was passed in 1964 which created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC was charged with investigating complaints of sexual and racial discrimination by employers. However, the EEOC rarely took cases of sexual discrimination seriously and were generally “only interested in trying cases that involved racial discrimination of black *men*” (Davis, 1991, pp. 22). In one case, the EEOC accused the Sears Company of sex-discrimination because so few of its female employees held administrative and commission sales positions. Sears’ defense was that “security and the social aspects of the work were more important to them than making the maximum pay; in addition, because most had to manage housework and child care at home, they preferred the easier sales jobs” (Davis, 1991). The EEOC cited discrimination as the main cause for lack of opportunity for women in the company. Never the less, more than five years after the case began, the courts ruled in favor of Sears. In defense of the EEOC, it was given very little real power; so, even if members did want to enforce Title VII, there was little authority to actually do so. The Commission could investigate a claim and attempt conciliation with the employer. If that didn’t work, the Commission could ask the Attorney General to sue, but the Attorney General could choose not to do so. As a last resort, the party that made the complaint could sue an individual under Title VII (Davis, 1991). Despite the obstacles women working through the EEOC faced, some changes were made under the Commission. For instance, in 1968 the EEOC was pressured into investigating and eliminating segregated want ads (ads that called for men or women in the job description). NOW members took hold of the issue of segregated

want ads in 1967 because they felt that segregated ads ensured that women would not be able to apply for the highest-paying jobs available. To garner national attention for this issue NOW members picketed the *New York Times* building, and declared a National Day of Demonstration against the EEOC in December 1967. In August 1968, the EEOC barred segregated want ads from U.S. newspapers (Rosen, 2006; Davis, 1991).

Despite the overall ineffectiveness of the EEOC in the 1960s and 70s, legislators did start paying attention to women's issues in that era. However, women continued to hold very few positions in high-office. For instance, "in 1971 males filled 98% of the seats in Congress, 95% of state legislatures were male, and there were no female governors" (Davis, 1991, pp. 187). Feminists believed that in order for women's interests to be fully represented in national government, more women should be speaking on their behalf. Shirley Chisholm decided to run for the Presidency of the United States in 1972. Chisholm, a democrat, was the first black woman elected to the U.S. Congress (in 1969 as a representative of the State of New York). Chisholm knew that she would not win the 1972 election. Her intention in running was prove that an African-American woman was able to run and receive votes, not based on her sex or race, but based on her ideas (Sochen, 1974). On the day of her announcement to run for president, Chisholm declared, "I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black, and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman and I am equally proud of that...I am the candidate of the people" (as cited in Gill, 1997). Chisholm may not have aimed her platform at women and African-Americans, but she did garner the majority of her support from civil rights activists and women's rights activists. However, certain factions of both groups opposed her campaign. Opposition formed from blacks and women mostly because both groups saw her candidacy as a symbolic gesture. Those opposed to

Chisholm's candidacy believed that in order for their voices to be heard by Congress, they had to support a viable candidate (Gutgold, 2006). The 1972 Democratic National Convention was the first major convention in which a black woman was given full consideration for the presidential nomination (Gill, 1997). Chisholm did not make it on to the ballot at the 1972 convention, but she did continue to serve in the House of Representatives until 1982.

Major progress was achieved during the second wave feminist movement, but there was still a lot to be accomplished. However, feminism ebbed in the 1980s due to a few major setbacks: the defeat of the ERA in 1982 discouraged many activists, NOW membership was down to almost half of its original numbers, government funds had dried up for feminists projects, and activists were "graying out" of activism (Davis, 1991). In addition, sex discrimination had been dealt with enough so that young women no longer saw the need for a feminist movement. Many felt that feminism had accomplished its goal of equal rights and that activism was no longer needed. In fact, the era after the 1980s has been labeled the "post-feminist" generation by many. This term is deceptive because it is descriptive of the lack of a movement, but in reality there are still feminist women fighting for the true equality of women today. To be sure, many things have improved for women, both legally and socially. However, at this time, poverty, violence, and sex-discrimination are still issues that women face in disproportionately higher rates than men (Shaw & Lee, 2007). Feminists today are still fighting for passage of the ERA, because it is just as important now as it was 40 years ago. The importance of the ERA in the 21st century is not as centered on increasing women's rights, as it is ensuring that the rights women have gained are not taken away. Feminists today are also fighting for issues such as national health care, child care, and legal rights for same-sex partners.

The third wave feminist movement began in the 1990s and has continued to today. The third wave is often seen as an extension of the second wave because it lacks the cohesiveness of the first and second waves. Additionally, there are fewer clear goals in the third wave feminist movement than there were in the first and the second waves. This could be due, in part, to the lack of feminist leaders in the third-wave movement. There is no Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan or Elizabeth Cady Stanton in today's movement, no definitive leader. The lack of organization, leadership, and clear goals in this movement had led many to misinterpret the purpose of the third-wave, and it causes a great deal of confusion about what feminists are doing today, and why. It is also difficult to pick feminists out of a crowd these days, as so few people are willing to admit that they are feminists. Women and girls are especially fearful of claiming the feminist label because of what it has come to mean (crazy, overdramatic, screaming, man-hating, lesbians who lack humor and don't shave their legs). Some get offended when they hear their daughters or friends are going to become women's studies majors in college because they fear their loved ones will turn into the feminist stereotype. However, many women claim that equality is important, that women deserve respect in relationships, that women have the right to choose to have a career while raising children, and that women have the right to determine if they want to be mothers. Most people who begin a sentence with "I'm no feminist, but..." finish the sentence with a hypocritical statement about how they believe in a tenant of feminism. Many people don't want to admit that they are feminist because they do not truly understand what feminism is. The disconnect between what people think feminism is and what feminism really represents is a struggle feminists have been trying to overcome since the first wave. The third wave is continuing to fight that battle (Heywood & Drake, 1997).

One major difference between the second and third waves is that most second wave feminists were focused primarily on political activism with the aim of changing social policy, while the third wave has turned feminism into more of an academic process (Meredith, 2003; Whelehan, 1995). The danger in feminism remaining academic is that it will eventually become politically ineffective. Feminists today are more or less forced to take the academic route because the key to getting people to become women's rights activists is to first have them admit that they are feminists. Education is an important first step in becoming aware of women's issues, but unless that education is transformed into political action it will provide no change in the status quo of women's rights.

Those who still practice feminist activism do not organize in the same ways as activists in the past. Women's rights activists have always used the written word to communicate the necessity of activism. Previously, women have seen those writings as the impetus for actively coming together in large numbers around a cause. However, today, feminist writers do not ask women to physically "come together". Instead, women are asked to write their legislators when a bill concerning women is going to be voted on, boycott certain stores and restaurants that practice sex-discrimination, and challenge sex-discrimination in their everyday lives just as vehemently as they would in politics (Gilmore, 2001). This new type of organizing is effective, but rarely noticed because of its underground nature; this may be one reason why people don't see feminism in action today. The internet is one of the most important rallying tools for any kind of modern activism, feminism included. Websites like, Feminist.com, FeministBlogs.com, FeministPress.org, and BeingJane.com promote feminism and feminist goals by educating women on what feminism is and the importance of taking action against anti-feminist beliefs. These websites also attempt to re-define feminism in a way that is appealing to more people so

as to include as many people as possible in the movement. They also educate people on what feminists are doing today, and for what cause.

The most difficult task for today's feminists is changing people's minds about what feminism is. Feminists today are asked to gather support for a movement that people think is dead or unnecessary. The purpose of the remainder of this essay is to change the perception most people have of feminists, and to convince the reader that feminism is not dead or unnecessary. Feminism, in all its forms, will be explored and analyzed in a new way in order to discuss the goals of the modern feminist movement. In addition, a definition of feminism will be developed that is inclusive of as many aspects of the term as possible.

Types of Feminism

The main purpose in writing this essay is to develop a definition of feminism which is representative of as many types of feminists as possible. However, one of the many reasons feminism is so hard to define is because there are so many different types. Feminism is not a monolithic ideology, because not all feminists think alike. Feminism is practiced in many different ways depending on the individual's ultimate goal of feminist practice. Each 'type' of feminist believes in a different cause, practice, and result of feminism. Liberal, radical, and socialist feminism are the most widely known and taught. However, lesbian, multiracial, cultural, global, and existential feminist theory are also important theories to understand.

Liberal feminism focuses on the societal barriers to equality for women and attempts to work through the present political system to make changes. Liberal feminists aim to make incremental changes through the present systems, such as state and federal policies. These theorists stress the importance of educational and economic opportunities for women in the public sphere as well as equal rights in the home and community (Saulnier, 1996; Shaw & Lee,

2007). Liberal feminist groups, such as NOW, have sought to provide equal rights to women through legislative processes. Liberal groups have fought for the passage of the ERA, equal employment opportunities, maternity leave, affordable child care, education, high quality health care, and reproductive rights through legislation mandating their importance (Tong, 1998):

Oppositely, radical feminists recognize the oppression of women as “fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as inferior based upon their gender. It is not enough to remove obstacles; rather, deeper more transformational changes need to be made in societal institutions (like the government or media) as well as in people’s heads” (Shaw & Lee, 2007, pp. 10). Radicals tend not to work within the current system, as liberal feminists do. Radical feminists believe that working within the system maintains the system, which is flawed. Instead, they focus on changing the patriarchal social order through individual consciousness modification. For this reason, radical feminists are known for their consciousness raising efforts; during which women are encouraged to start thinking of their personal problems as sociopolitical issues (Saulnier, 1996).

Socialist feminism often works alongside radical feminism. Socialist feminists claim that capitalist patriarchal societies are to blame for the gender bias present in America’s economic system. For example, women are, by-and-large, paid less than men for the same position. On average, women earn \$0.77 cents to each dollar earned by men (National Women’s Law Center, 2008). Moreover, women who choose not to work are not paid for housekeeping and child rearing duties. Some socialist feminists argue that resolving the issue of “24-hour-wageless-oppression” is key to incorporating women into the public sphere and ending the patriarchal system that is currently in place (Donovan, 1985, as cited in Saulnier, 1996). Crucial to accomplishing this task, is collective childrearing and professionalization of housework. Finally,

women are often not encouraged to put their careers before their family as men are. In general, when a couple has a baby, women are charged with the household duties while men are assigned the career path. Too often is it assumed that the woman will give up her professional life for the success of the family (Saulnier, 1996; Shaw & Lee, 2007). Socialist feminists believe that ending economic oppression should be feminist's first priority in ending sexual discrimination.

Lesbian feminist theory emerged in the 1970s. Some consider it wholly different from feminism and others describe it as "a central component of radical feminism" (Kitsinger, 1987, as cited in Saulnier, 1996, page 77). The creation of lesbian feminism was a response to the second wave's disillusionment with lesbianism and its inability to accommodate lesbians in the women's movement. In the early years of the second wave, some lesbians felt isolated and feared within the movement (for example, when Betty Friedan rejected lesbians from NOW). To make matters worse, they did not fit into the emerging gay movement either. Gay activists could understand the lesbian's sexual oppression, but gay men could not fully understand the homosexual woman's gender oppression. Lesbian feminist theorists generally define themselves as fighting for "women in general" and "envisioning the end not only to patriarchy, but to hierarchies based on race, class, age, and sexuality" (Radicalesbians, 1994, as cited in Saulnier, 1996, page 79). Lesbian feminists are aware that single-issue campaigns are essentially fruitless because ending one form of oppression will not necessarily end them all.

Lesbian feminists felt they had to separate from the women's movement because their sexual identity was not recognized. Likewise, many women of color felt their racial and ethnic identities were not addressed by the feminist movement. It is interesting then, that just as women broke away from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s because they felt their needs were not being met, some women of color broke away from the second wave women's movement of the

1960s and 70s because they felt their issues were not being addressed. Benita Roth (2004), author of *Separate Roads to Feminism*, suggests that the second wave of the women's movement was made up of many different feminisms (organizationally distinct movements that influenced each other). African-Americans, Chicanas, and other ethnic groups organized as feminists in groups separate from mainstream (white, middle-class) feminists. The most important reason for this rift was that women of color were part of at least 2 different communities, a racial community and a gender community, which they could not separate in their pursuit of equal opportunities. Furthermore, women of color are oftentimes fighting against intense economic oppression along with sexism and racism. The convergence of these forms of discrimination influenced the creation of multiracial feminist movements. It was essential for women of color to work within their racial community to promote their agenda for equality because, as previously stated, ending one form of oppression does not end them all (Roth, 2004; Shaw & Lee, 2007).

Cultural feminism developed from radical feminism, but the major distinction between the two is that while radical feminists believe that gender roles should be eliminated, cultural feminists, think that gender differences should be embraced and that characteristics ascribed to womanhood should be celebrated. The purpose of cultural feminism is to educate people on the value of women in society, and to acknowledge that women have traits and characteristics which make women more valuable than men in certain situations. Females have the ability to give birth and feed a child, which is an obvious advantage over men. Additionally, according to psychologists, women are better than men at communicating rationally instead of aggressively. Women are also more adept at conveying warmth, nurturance, and connectedness which are necessary for the continuation of the species (Saulnier, 1996). According to cultural feminists,

women have the innate ability, both biologically and emotionally, to secure the survival of the human race.

Women have, since the genesis of feminism, been working to end the oppression of all women, domestically and internationally (Saulnier, 1996; Wellman, 2004). It makes sense then, that global feminism be studied in a discussion of feminist theory. Global feminism applies to those who work across national borders in recognition of the fact that what happens to women in one part of the world affects women in every other part of the world. Today political and economic oppression are the primary focus of global feminism (Saulnier, 1996). This is not to say that social issues are not discussed among global feminists. In fact, rape, reproductive rights, and intimate partner violence are incredibly “hot topics” in international women’s issues (Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, n.d.). The biggest challenge for global feminists in the western world is advocating for women’s rights in a culturally competent way. This meaning, advocates sometimes forget that they are speaking *on behalf of* people not *for* people. Advocates for international women’s issues must keep in mind the culture, needs, skills, and strengths of the women with whom they are working or they may end up fighting endlessly for rights the women they represent are not concerned about (Freedman, 2002 as cited in Shaw & Lee, 2007).

Finally, Simone de Beauvoir introduced the world to existential feminism in the mid 1900’s. This theory asserts that society views male as the natural state of human being, and female and feminine attributes as the ‘other’. The woman (other) is seen as a threat to man (self) and masculinity, so they must be kept subordinate to man. For this reason, Beauvoir suggests that femininity was created by men and ascribed to women to ensure that women would not be able to harm man’s freedom. Beauvoir also claims that to call women the ‘other’ assumes that they

are the opposite of men, and that this is not the case (Mahon, 1997). The task for existential feminism then, is to answer the question, “what is a woman if not the opposite of man?” To this, Beauvoir responds that womanhood should not be a condition of humanness.

In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say, “You think thus and so because you are a woman”, but I know that my only defense is to reply, “I think thus and so because it is true”, thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply, “And you think the contrary because you are a man”, for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine (Beauvoir, 1953).

In order for women to overcome the social roles to which they are assigned, Beauvoir asserts that they must join the workforce, enter the ranks of the intellectuals, and take part in social reform (Beauvoir, 1953; Crotty, 1998; Tong, 1998). Through these actions women will gain respect through merit. Essentially, women must prove they are not the opposite of man, but that they are man’s equal.

All of these ‘types’ of feminism are practiced by feminists today. Each provides its own explanation for the cause of female oppression, and a means to the end of sex-discrimination. If one looks at the combination of these types feminism, it is easy to see how feminism in general allows for anyone to be part of the women’s movement: white women, women of color, heterosexual women, homosexual women, working class women, wealthy women, married women, single women, women with children, and even men. In fact, it is a common misconception that feminists are anti-male or that they reject men in the women’s movement. Contrary to popular belief, most feminists celebrate men who practice feminism.

Men in the Movement

As long as there have been feminist women, there have been feminist men. As a matter of fact, since men have historically held the majority of power in the United States, female American feminists have relied on pro-feminist men to make legal strides towards equal rights. Men in the movement may be privileged due to their sexual status, but they have not had it easy. Many men who support women's rights are subject to other men questioning their masculinity and sexual orientation, as if endorsing women's equality makes a man feminine or homosexual. Anti-feminist men have traditionally seen pro-feminist men as 'traitors to their sex', because anti-feminist men often believe that giving women equal rights means taking away rights from men. While this is certainly not feminism's aim, this anti-feminist belief has not helped the women's movement, or, for that case, men who are involved in it (Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992).

Many men fear losing their masculinity if they concede to being a feminist; they equate being a feminist with being female. While this is certainly not the case, it is a hard notion for many men to overcome because of how masculinity is defined in the Western world. For instance, strength, power, and reason are generally coined as masculine characteristics. These traits are also categorized as "positive" traits in human beings. So, if $A=B=C$, then it is understood that a person with masculine traits is better than a person with feminine traits (James, n.d., as cited in Ewing & Schacht, 1998). A number of scholars assume that redefining the definition of male or female would provide a solution to the inferior status of women in society. However, according to essayist Christine James, "if we re-write or re-define the inferior, deprivileged side of that dualism, we cannot correct its devalued status. Instead, we redefine that which is undervalued but retain its devalued status. [Additionally], while the devalued side of a hierarchical dualism tends to keep the same status when redefined, it may be possible to redefine

the privileged side of the dualism in such a way that it loses its privileged status” (as cited in Ewing & Schacht, 1998, pp. 183). To be clear, it is not the aim of feminism to bring men down to the level of women. The goal of feminism is to allow men and women to share the privilege that is usually assigned to men. So, in contradiction to James, it is unnecessary to redefine male or female, as this would only strengthen the idea that men and women are inherently different. In order for society as a whole to overcome the concept of male=positive while female=negative, we must learn to value equally the characteristics each person has, not the characteristics each sex is prescribed to have. The dichotomous nature of sexual characterization must be eliminated and replaced with a value system that depends on the actual traits a person possesses.

Anti-feminist men often cite affirmative action laws, child custody laws, alimony laws, and domestic violence laws as discriminating to men because they enforce the rights of women over men. These “discriminatory laws” are one of the reasons many men refuse to admit that they agree with feminism’s aims. What those men don’t realize is that feminism’s goal of equality does not include taking rights away from men. Feminism does, however, involve enlarging the arena of individual freedom for men and women so that they might be equal under the law and in the home (Kimmel, 1995). Fredrick Douglass, one of America’s first male feminists stated in 1848, “This cause is not altogether and exclusively woman’s cause. It is the cause of human brotherhood as well as human sisterhood, and both must rise and fall together. Woman cannot be elevated without elevating man, and man cannot be depressed without depressing woman also” (as cited in Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992, pp. 19). Douglass’ insightful statement proves that true feminism, from its inception, has never been concerned with taking rights away from men, only putting women on an equal playing field to ensure that they are not subject to discrimination or oppression. In addition, Floyd Dell (1912), a nineteenth century

political writer, claimed that “feminism is going to make it possible for the first time for men to be free”. Dell speaks of freedom for men through feminism. Again, this is not a new feminist concept! For example, proponents of the ERA, from the early 1900s to today, have argued that equal rights legislation would make it possible for men to be heard equally in child custody battles, domestic violence trials, and affirmative action suits. Feminists are not seeking power over men, only equal claim to the same sources of power.

The reader should be beginning to surmise that there is no universal male response to feminism. Just like women, some men support feminism, others reject it, and still others support feminist aims without admitting to being a feminist. The National Organization for Men (NOM), an anti-feminist organization, opposes affirmative action, abortion rights, voting rights for women, pay equity, imprisonment of men for nonpayment of alimony, and giving preference to women in custody issues. It is important to note, members of this group do not call themselves anti-feminist; instead they practice as a group advocating for equal rights for all (NOM, n.d.). However, by solely fighting for the end of “oppression of men”, this group fails to challenge the oppression of women. Thus, this group is not fighting for equal rights; they are defending men’s rights. On the other hand, there are men who actively think and act as feminists. The National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) is one such group of men. NOMAS is a “pro-feminist, gay-affirmative, anti-racist group attempting to enrich men’s lives” (NOMAS, 2008). In accordance with the group’s mission statement, NOMAS is committed to challenging sexism through education. This group asserts that women are the most direct victims of patriarchal social systems and that in order for sexual stereotypes to be abolished, traditional systems of patriarchy must be challenged. Then there are groups that take a middle ground, neither opposing not advocating for women’s rights. These groups, such as the National Coalition for Free Men

(NCFM), allege that men and women cannot be free until all sex discrimination is exempt. This group suggests that social roles and stereotypes are unfair to men and women, and that both groups suffer under gender assignments (NCFM, 2009). This group does not consider itself feminist, because it does not promote the rights of women, per-say. However, it can be argued that this is a feminist group because it does promote awareness of men's and women's issues as they relate to equality, and equality of the sexes is the primary tenant of feminism.

There is definitely a place for men in the women's movement. More importantly, men can *be* feminists. However, there are some people, even men, who believe that while men can support the goals of feminists, they cannot be feminists. For example, Michael Kimmel and Thomas Mosmiller, editors of *Against the Tide: Pro-feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990*, use the term "pro-feminist" in their book when referring to men who support feminism. They claim to use this term because

stripped to its essentials, feminism involves the empirical observation that women and men are not equal in either the public or the private sphere and also the moral stance that such inequality is wrong and ought to be changed. Men may agree with this empirical assessment of women's subordinate status and the moral imperative to work toward equality. In that sense, men *believe* in feminism. But to *be* a feminist, we believe, requires another ingredient: the felt experience of oppression. And this, men cannot feel because men are not oppressed, but privileged, by sexism...to *be* a feminist, one needs to share the feminist analysis and vision, as well as to experience that oppression (Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992, pp. 3).

However, the author of this study believes that men can be feminists without feeling the oppression of being a woman. In fact, it would be in a man's best interest to be a feminist.

Dismantling the effects of sexual stereotypes would benefit men as well as women. If women are fighting against the stereotype of being passive, loyal, and obedient, men are fighting the stereotype of being masochist power-mongers without the ability to communicate emotions

(Brod, n.d.). The catalogue of women's characteristics verses men's characteristics should be destroyed. Instead human characteristics should be viewed as belonging to both sex and neither sex at the same time. Feminism is fighting for this standard of equality for both men and women. So why do most men claim that they support feminism, without calling themselves feminists? It may be that, like Kimmel and Mossmiller, men do not want to use the word feminism because they do not truly understand the plight of women. However, as the reader will see in the next section, it could for many of the same reasons women do not want to claim they are feminists.

What Feminism is Not

Many people feel they must introduce a conversation about women's rights with, "I'm no feminist, but I believe that insert feminist belief here". People are afraid of labeling themselves as feminists, but why? One possible reason is the stereotype of feminists that comes from media images.

The media of the 1970s and 80s produced two basic stereotypes of feminists. One was the hairy, man-hating dyke, dressed in overalls and stomping boots, an image mostly confined to college campuses and to the youthful women's culture. The second and far more ubiquitous image was that of a selfish "superwoman". For the vast majority of Americans who had not participated in the movement, here was the hateful woman who came to represent the feminist in American imagination; a selfish and demonic individualist (Rosen, 2006, pp. 295).

The perpetrators of such ugly images of feminists are afraid of what female equality will mean if it is realized. Fear of feminism and its supporters promotes the "us versus them" ideology, a main component of which is to discredit "them". To do this, anti-feminists assert that gender inequality is no longer a reality and that feminists are fighting for rights they have had all along. By refusing to acknowledge the concrete realities of women's lives, anti-feminists degrade the women's movement into a band of over-dramatic, overly-sensitive, self-centered women with

the aim of destroying theirs and other women's lives by crying wolf. Many anti-feminists wrongly assume that through pro-feminist legislation women will be faced with fewer choices (Burkett, 1998). This could include things such as forcing women to work outside of the home, a draft which includes women and would force women into combat, and court mandated sex and contraception education. However, feminists are not attempting to make anything obligatory for women. They are simply trying to give women choices. If a woman chooses to quit her job and raise a family, that is her prerogative. But, it should be her decision to do so, not her obligation. Likewise if a woman decides to work and raise a family, that should be her decision. Along a similar vein, in the case of reproductive rights, feminists contend that motherhood should be a choice. In this instance, this means the choice between using birth control or not. It also means the right to choose to have an abortion in the event of an unplanned pregnancy. Feminists are not for or against birth control or abortion. Feminists only want to ensure that options are available to women. So, feminism is not about restricting rights, it is about expanding rights for women.

There are many myths associated with feminists and feminist thought. The purpose of this part of the paper is to dispel some of these myths in order that a true definition of feminism can be composed. Shaw and Lee (2007) assert that feminism has been associated with

(1) angry, whiney women who have an axe to grind, no sense of humor, and who exaggerated discrimination against women; (2) it is declared that feminists hate men or want to be like men and selfishly want to create new systems of power *over* men; (3) all feminists are said to be lesbians; (4) feminists are said to reject motherhood, consider children a burden, and have rejected all things feminine; (5) feminism is dismissed as a White, middle-class movement that draws energy away from attempts to correct social and economic problems and discourages coalition building (pp. 14).

It is certainly true that each of these stereotypes have been exhibited by some feminists at one time or another; after all, stereotypes are usually rooted in some germ of truth. Some feminists do

hate men, others are lesbians, and some do not want to have children or get married. However, as is true of stereotypes, these do not apply to all feminists. The first myth is easy to dispel.

Feminists try to evoke social change through peaceful means against felt or experienced oppression. They do not purposefully exaggerate their experiences with discrimination. It would be fruitless for women to fight against oppression they have “made up”. Second, feminists do not want to be like men. As stated before, feminists do not expect men to be lowered to their status or for women to be heightened to men’s status, they only hope that someday men and women will be given the same opportunities and treated according to their abilities instead of on the basis of their sex. Moreover, feminists do not want *more* power than men, only equal claim to that power. Third, some feminists are lesbians, but not all of them. It is true that feminism affirms a woman’s choice to love whomever she chooses, but it is a misconception that feminists promote lesbianism as a tenant of feminism. Fourth, feminists do not reject motherhood or childrearing. In actuality, feminists attempt to improve the conditions under which women mother. Feminists understand and respect the importance of raising children, but they also acknowledge that women should not be hindered socially or economically because of their choice to be a mother. Finally, the feminist movement does not exclude women of color or working class women as some anti-feminists assert. In fact, true feminists claim that all women, and men, should be part of the feminist movement.

There are powerful and influential people that have, time and again, attempted to promote the negative myths of feminism. For instance, according to television evangelist Pat Robertson, “feminism is not about equal rights for women. It is a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians” (1992, as cited in PBS, 2005, para. 3). Robertson made this

assertion at the 1992 Republican National Convention. Robertson, an ardent ERA rival, believes that the “feminist agenda” is going to destroy the lives of “good” American women, children, and men. His views are mostly supported by conservative Christian organizations which insist that they are fighting against the disintegration of the family unit by opposing feminism (Burkett, 1998). Adding to the myths debunked in the previous paragraph, Robertson claims that feminism is a political movement that aims to destroy capitalism; he is half right. Feminism is a political (and social) movement. However, feminists, as a group, do not encourage women to destroy capitalism. Truly, there have been feminists in the movement who believe that socialism, communism, or another form of government could solve women’s problems caused by the American patriarchal system of government. However, there are feminists that are committed to solving women’s problems through the current system, instead of destroying it. These women advocate for equal opportunity employment, pay equity, and free or low-cost childcare to support women in the work-force.

There are also political activists fighting for the end of feminism in America. Phyllis Schlafly, an ERA opponent who began her anti-feminist campaign during the second wave, has been praised as a savior by her followers, and damned by her adversaries. To her followers she was the indispensable leader of the STOP ERA campaign; she symbolized “true womanhood” and fought for an alternative type of women’s rights, the type that would make sure women could stay where they naturally belonged, which, to Schlafly and her followers, was in the home. Schlafly favors a sharp division of labor in marriage. She has stated, “Women have babies, and men provide the support. If you don’t like the way we’re made, you’ve got to take it up with God” (Felsenthal, 1981, pp, 112). Schlafly alleged that women who have careers instead of babies will constantly be dissatisfied, because a career is not enough to make a woman happy.

The opposite sentiment was the impetus for the creation of the second wave feminist movement: women who abandoned career goals for their families kept asking themselves “Is this it? Is this all that defines me?” The women’s liberation movement and the STOP ERA supporters both spoke for different segments of American women, and neither was right or wrong. Some women were concerned about their diminishing rights (feminists) and others were concerned about what equal rights would mean (anti-feminists). What is wrong is the way in which Schlafly defined feminism. In her book *Feminist Fantasies*, Schlafly (2003) wrote,

The ideology of feminism teaches that women have been mistreated since time began and that even in America women are discriminated against by an oppressive male-dominated society. As a political movement, feminism teaches that a just society must mandate identical treatment for men and women in every phase of our lives, no matter how reasonable it is to treat them differently, and that gender must never be used as the criterion for any decision.

As an economic movement, feminism teaches that true fulfillment and liberation for women are in a paying job rather than in the confining, repetitious drudgery of the home, and that child care must not be allowed to interfere with a woman’s career. Feminism’s psychological outlook on life is basically negative; it teaches women that the odds are stacked so severely against them that they probably cannot succeed in whatever they attempt.

Feminism has nothing at all to do with being “feminine”. Feminine means accentuating the womanly attributes that make women deliciously different from men. The feminine woman enjoys her right to be a woman. She has a positive outlook on life. She knows that she is a person with her own identity and that she can seek fulfillment in the career of her choice, including that of traditional wife and mother” (pp. 5)

Schlafly is wrong about several points in this definition. First, Schlafly’s claim that feminists want all women to be treated exactly as men in all situations is not true. Feminist simply argue that women deserve the same opportunities as men, and likewise that men deserve the same opportunities as women. For instance, a man should never be chosen over a woman for a job because of his sex, and a woman should never be chosen over a man in a child custody hearing because of her sex. It is all about equal treatment under the law. Additionally, feminism

does not teach that true fulfillment comes from a paying job rather than raising a family.

Feminism teaches that women should have the right to choose which is more fulfilling; neither choice is more respected than the other, and neither is looked down upon by feminists.

Moreover, if women want to have a job and raise a family, this should be their prerogative. Also, many feminists have a positive outlook about their status in American society; otherwise they would not put the time and effort into this cause. Finally, feminist women can be traditionally feminine! Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000), third wave feminist writers, wrote

Maybe you aren't sure you need feminism, or you're not sure it needs you. You're sexy, a wallflower, you shop at Calvin Klein, you are a stay-at-home mom, a big Hollywood producer, a beautiful bride all in white, an ex-wife raising three kids, or you shave, pluck, *and* wax. In reality, feminism wants you to be whoever you are-but with a political consciousness. And, vice versa: You want to be a feminist because you want to be exactly who you are (pp. 53).

Many feminists wear dresses and jewelry, have husbands and children, and love to sew, cook, dance, paint, and do other “feminine” things. Feminists believe that women should be able to do all of these things, as long as it is the woman’s choice. Feminists believe that women should be able to wear-makeup and paint their nails with a clear conscience that they are doing it because it is what they want, not because it is what their husband, or boyfriend, or friends expect them to do. Feminism is not about rejecting femininity, it is about embracing it with the knowledge that femininity is what you want, not what those in your environment want *for* you. Like all other aspects of the feminist doctrine, feminists believe that a woman should not feel obligated or forced to do anything, it should always be her choice.

Anti-feminists like Phyllis Schlafly, Pat Robertson, Rush Limbaugh, Pat Buchanan, and others appeal to women who are afraid of what equal rights would mean for them. Anti-feminists blame feminists for the disintegration of the family, destruction of femininity, and the denigration of motherhood. However, it is the author’s hope that the reader will understand that

none of these claims are valid under the true definition of feminism. The real aim of feminism is to increase opportunities for men and women, not to take away rights they have been endowed with. In the next section, a definition of feminism will be developed that can be used to describe feminists today.

What is Feminism?

Rosalind Delmar (1983) writes, "How difficult it would be to find the 'true' feminist image, the 'proper way' to be a feminist. And yet, many books on feminism are written, and feminism is often spoken about, as if there were a 'true' and authentic feminism, unified and consistent over time and in any one place, even if fragmented in its origins and at specific historical moments" (pp. 9). The purpose of this section is to evaluate definitions of feminism given by writers, historians, feminists, and scholars to develop a comprehensive definition of feminism today. As Delmar insinuated in the quote above, feminism is not a constant, it is elastic, and it changes over time; it is "a fluid, ongoing process rather than a sharply delineated thing" (Rosen, 484). The goals of feminism have changed over time; therefore, the definition of what a feminist is has changed over time. However, the one main tenant of feminism, equality for all people, has held true throughout history.

Vivian Gornick has claimed that "Feminism has within it the seed of a genuine world view. Like every real system of thought it is able to refer itself to everything in our lives" (as cited in Rosen, pp.199). Likewise, Charlotte Bunch has asserted that "Feminism is an entire gestalt, not just a laundry list of 'women's issues'. Feminist theory provides a basis for understanding every area of our lives, and a feminist perspective can affect the world politically, culturally, economically, and spiritually" (as cited in Donelson, 1999, pp. 14). Feminists do not simply ask that women be seen as equals in the workplace or in the home, or that women be

freed from sex-discrimination and oppression. While these issues are important, feminists ultimately strive to change the eyes through which people see issues. The feminist perspective provides a lens, through which, people analyze issues. This lens helps people understand the importance of equality, respect, and dignity of people in all instances. The goal of feminism then, is not to provoke people to only see the importance of women's equality, but to see the absolute necessity of human equality. In fact, many modern feminists refer to feminism as a type of humanism. Some feminists believe that "feminism is a contemporary participant in, and interpreter of, the ideals of modern humanism...Feminism means the demand that women should, along with men, enjoy the human task and responsibility of making themselves" (Johnson, 1994, pp. 1). These 'humanist feminists' believe that human rights are more important than women's rights, men's rights, GLBT rights, African American's rights, or any other group of people's rights, separately. Humanist feminists express the notion that all people should be offered the same opportunities in education, employment, and personal choices because everyone should have the right to become a whole, realized human being, in whatever way they choose.

Feminists fight for "the removal of all social, political, economic, and other discriminations which are based upon sex, and the award of all rights and duties in all fields on the basis of individual capacity alone" (Matthews, 2003, pp. 105). This definition is reminiscent of the humanist feminist definition in that it describes people on the basis of their characteristics, not on their sex. According to this definition, people should not be evaluated based on their actions as they apply to their gender, but on their actions as they apply to their humanness. Society should not ascribe certain characteristics to men and women, but should determine what are "good" and "bad" traits only as they apply to humans. By refusing to prescribe certain

characteristics to people based on their gender, society also refuses to accept that a person is inherently better or worse because of their sex. Seeing people as human instead of as men and women extinguishes sex-discrimination and the oppression that inherently comes with it, one of the most important goals of feminism.

Gerda Lerner, a modern feminist writer, defines the feminist consciousness as

the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but is societally determined; they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination (Lerner, 1993, pp. 14).

Similar to definitions previously analyzed, Lerner describes a type of feminism that calls for a reorganization of societal values. Lerner maintains that in order for all people to attempt to live fulfilling, enriching lives, people must recognize that all people should have that right. Lerner adds to the feminist definition that people must become aware of the subordination of women and that the condition of subordination is not natural, but socially determined. Biology may have determined that men and women are different, but society has determined that it values one sex over the other. For this value system to change, it must be recognized and challenged. Feminists believe that men and women should be treated equally, but not all feminists believe that men and women are exactly alike. In fact, many feminists aim to accentuate and celebrate the inherent differences in men and women. The goal then is not to eliminate differences; the goal is to value those differences as equally important.

According to third wave feminist writers Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000),

Feminism has three components: 1) it is a movement, meaning a group working to accomplish specific goals, 2) those goals are social and political change; implying

that one must be engaged with the government and law, as well as social practice and beliefs 3) and implicit to these goals is access to sufficient information to enable women to make responsible choices (as cited in Fisanick, 2008, pp. 25).

Feminism is a movement with many specific goals, and those goals do include social and political change. In addition, feminist activists encourage other feminists to actively participate in social and political change, because as previously stated, without political activism the status quo of women's rights will remain as such. However, activism in the modern world doesn't always look like people's perceptions of activism (i.e. marches and rallies with thousands of people). Challenging discrimination in everyday life is an easy way to become a feminist activist (i.e. advocating for free child care at work places so that mothers do not have to give up their professional role for their motherly role). Feminist activists also try to educate people about bills that affect the lives and rights of women in order to influence people to write their legislators and representatives in support of the rights of women. The goal of feminist activism is to ensure that women are given equal opportunities and that, when given those opportunities, they are able to make educated choices about their lives.

At a conference sponsored by the UN Asian and Pacific Center for Women and Development, held in Bangkok, in 1987, attendees defined feminism in terms of two goals:

1) the freedom from oppression for women which involves not only equity, but also the right of women to freedom and choice, and the power to control our own lives within and outside the home. Having control over our lives and bodies is essential to ensure a sense of dignity and autonomy for every woman. 2) the removal of all forms of inequity and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. This means the involvement of women in national liberation struggles, in plans for national development, and in local and global struggles for change (Bunch, 1987 as cited in Saulnier, 1996, page 150).

The first part of this definition is very similar to some of the previously analyzed definitions. It includes women's equality, freedom from oppression, and the freedom for each person to make

choices based on what is best for their bodies and lives. The second part of the definition expands on the previously mentioned ideal of creating a different social value system that sees women as of equal importance to men. In this definition, it is not enough to change the existing values of society. Instead, a completely new value system must be created to ensure that women are involved in national development and global change. Globalization, the expansion of global business and the effectual “shrinking” of the world, has led to improvements and set-backs for women internationally. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2009),

On the one hand, it has led to increasing violations of women’s economic, political, and cultural rights in large measure due to the withering away of the welfarist/developmentalist state, the feminization of poverty, the expansion of religious fundamentalisms, and new forms of militarism and conflict. It has been noted by many international women’s organizations, for example, that the new trade agreements contravene the spirit and often the letter of international conventions on human rights, labor rights, and women’s rights. On the other hand, aspects of globalization have provided women with increasing opportunities to work in solidarity at national, regional, and international levels to demand their rights (para. 1).

The most important thing to realize about globalization’s effect on women is that the detrimental effects much be acknowledged so that the positive effects can be multiplied. Feminists believe that, carried out the right way, globalization has the potential to improve human rights and the status of women all over the world. However, in order for this to be the effect of globalization, women must be specifically considered in each country’s developmental changes, including the United States.

American feminists believe in equal rights for all women, internationally and at home.

The myth that the majority of feminist goals are to improve the lives of white, American women is false. Gloria Steinem (1983) said, “Feminism, by its very definition, has to include females as

a caste across economic and racial boundaries, just as a movement against racial caste includes each individual marked by it, regardless of sex or class; one cannot be successfully uprooted without taking on the other” (pp. 5). Here Steinem is referring to the necessity of including a person’s race in their identity when fighting for their rights. It is impossible to say that a black woman is either a) black or b) a woman. This is the same for White, Latina, Asian, and Native American women. It is for this reason that feminists aim to abolish sex-discrimination along with racial, ethnic, religious, and class discrimination. Barbara Smith has said, “Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement” (as cited in Anzaldua, 1990, pp. 25). Smith explains a very important tenant of feminism here; the feminist vision is the realization of total freedom for all women. However, it is important to add to this definition that feminists aim for the total freedom of all people, which includes women *and men*. Feminists aim to create equal opportunities and equal rights for all people regardless of sex, race, or class. A true definition of feminism includes the importance of equal rights, not men’s and women’s rights separately.

bell hooks (2000) expands on the idea that men’s rights are included in a feminist’s goal of equal rights, “Masses of people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to men. And a huge majority of these folks think feminism is anti-male. Their misunderstanding of feminist politics reflects the reality that most folks learn about feminism from patriarchal mass media” (pp. 1). Here, hooks is commenting on the misconception of feminism most people get from media sources (TV, movies, magazines) and how that is hurting the movement. Feminism is not anti-male, and the goal of feminism is not to take rights away

from men. The goal of feminism is to ensure all people have equal rights. Feminists work to ensure that all people are granted the same rights and equal opportunities at home, at work, and everywhere else. Additionally, “Feminism is a movement to end sexist exploitation and oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men” (hooks, 1983 as cited in Ewing & Schacht, 1998, pp. 174). Here, hooks explains further the idea that feminism is about equal rights for all people, not the heightened status of women over men. The misconception that feminists strive to be better, more valued, or more important than men is a tough one for most feminists to overcome. The view of feminists as anti-male is a stereotype that is entrenched in the American people’s psyche, and it is for which feminists must constantly compensate.

To be sure, the status of men in America is extremely intertwined with the status of women in America. This is one of the most important reasons why all people should identify themselves as feminists. In 1853, Henry Brown Blackwell said “The interests of the sexes are inseparably connected, and in the elevation of the one lies the salvation of the other. Therefore, I claim a part of this last and grandest movement of the ages, for whatever concerns woman concerns the [human] race” (as cited in Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992, pp.1). This quote is evidence of the fact that, from the very beginning feminists have been concerned with the human rights of all people. Feminists, like Blackwell, understand that giving all people equal rights ensures that no person suffers from a lack of rights. Men have an important stake in feminism, as shown in the “Men in Feminism” section of this essay, and men are encouraged by feminists to be feminists and to do feminism.

Karen Offen (1988) also includes men in her definition of feminism, which includes the importance of evaluating a woman’s interpretation of her experiences.

I would consider as feminists any persons, male or female, whose ideas and actions show them to meet three criteria: 1) they recognize the validity of women's own interpretations of their lived experience needs and acknowledge the values women claim publicly as their own (as distinct from an aesthetic ideal of womanhood invented by men) in assessing their status in society relative to men; 2) they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequity) toward women as a group by men as a group in a given society; 3) they advocate the elimination of that injustice by challenging, through efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions and practices, the coercive power, force, or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture (as cited in Ewing & Schacht, 1998, pp.10).

The first component of this definition acknowledges the importance of validating a woman's interpretation of her experiences and the values she claims are important. Feminists believe that a woman who feels oppression is oppressed, and that a woman who feels discrimination is discriminated against. Feminism is a validating ideology in that it does not ignore the felt response a woman has to her environment. In fact, the roots of feminism are based on the felt oppression that so many women had in common. Feminists also believe in acknowledging the values women claim as important instead of the values men prescribe for them to believe. Feminists believe that a woman's value should be determined by more than her traditional femininity, attractiveness, or ability to nurture. Instead, a woman's value should be determined by the woman in question. Again, this goes back to acknowledging a woman's interpretation of her experiences and herself. In addition, the second and third concepts in this definition explain that feminists challenge injustice and advocate for the elimination of all forms of sex-discrimination as perpetuated by traditions of male power. Feminists understand that in a patriarchal society, such as in America, equal rights can never be a reality. So, feminists challenge people to re-evaluate society as a whole with the goal of re-organizing its values. The ultimate goal, for feminists, is for society to value women and men equally, and while each sex may have different traits, none of those traits should be more valued than others.

Margaret Fuller, a nineteenth century transcendentalist, understood feminism as the right of women to be able to think and act according to their own will. Fuller claimed that feminism is “getting women to the point from which they shall naturally develop self-respect and learn self-help” (Sochen, 1974, pp. 129). She understood women’s psychological dependency on men, as well as the use of male-devised standards for evaluating all accomplishments in our culture. Fuller also said, “when the mind is once awakened to this consciousness, it will not be restrained by the habits of the past...it is therefore that I would have Woman lay aside all thought, such as she habitually cherishes, of being taught and led by men...I would have her free from compromise, compliance, and helplessness” (Sochen, 1974, pp. 129). Fuller’s sentiments here express the roots of the consciousness raising movement of the second wave. She acknowledges that all people are judged on a standard created for men (based on what we value as a culture). However, she saw importance in women to seeing the world through a woman’s eyes instead of through male perceptions of what women should be. Women should be able to decide what values are important to themselves as women. Feminists would agree with this statement, but with one modification. While, feminists do believe that it is important not to judge women based on a man’s idea of what she should or shouldn’t be, it is equally important not to judge a man based on what society thinks he should look like, act like, or value. Stereotypes are over simplified, and no matter their intended recipient, they do not apply to all members of any group. One role of feminism is to advocate for the elimination of sex-role stereotypes of men and women so that each are able to live according to their own values. Feminists believe that all people deserve to be judged based on their traits as they apply to person’s humanity, not their sex. Good and bad traits only exist because society has deemed them as such.

Through the analysis presented on these definitions of feminism it is possible to create a definition of feminism which encompasses all of these definitions for a broader interpretation of the word. In accordance with the research done for this essay, a feminist can be defined in the following way: Any person, regardless of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual-orientation, ability, or age, who believes that 1) discrimination, oppression, and exploitation based solely on sex is wrong, 2) equal rights for all people is more important than privileged rights for either sex, 3) the value of every person is based on each individual's actual characteristics and not their perceived traits as they pertain to the person's sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual-orientation, ability, or age, 4) every person has value, and that is determined by their characteristics and not their sex (or any other separate defining feature), 5) the inferior status of any person is granted by a society that values certain traits over others, and the elimination of sex discrimination will be achieved only through the abolition of sex stereotypes and the creation of a system which sees value in all people, 6) every person deserves the freedom to make choices about their lives and bodies as they see fit, 7) social and political change is necessary in order to create true sex-equity, and feminists should be involved in both avenues of change, 8) all people deserve equal access to resources so that every person may thrive in their environment, 9) all people deserve access to the information necessary to make responsible, informed decisions about their lives and bodies. This definition does not represent all feminists, but it does encompass the majority of modern feminist ideals and include most people who live and practice as feminists. It would be impossible to include all feminists in one definition. However, this definition spells out the basic tenants of feminist thought, as discussed throughout this study.

Conclusion

The myths and stereotypes associated with feminism create some of the biggest struggles in feminism today. It is important that people educate themselves on the true definition of feminism before they judge whether or not they are feminists themselves. It is important for all people to understand what feminism can do for them and for society. Equality for all people, the central tenant of feminism, would benefit everyone, not just certain segments of society. This one ideal would create a society which would judge people on their value as people, instead of basing an individual's value on stereotypes associated with their sex. Many people today do not understand who feminists are, or what feminists are fighting for. Feminism is a viable, necessary movement, even today, and the first step in helping people realize this will be accomplished through educating people about true feminism. Feminists have accomplished many goals in the fight for women's rights, but the fight for full equal rights must continue. In the words of nineteenth-century suffragist Abigail Scott Duniway, "The young women of today, free to study, to speak, to write, to choose their occupation, should remember that every inch of this freedom was bought for them at a great price. It is for them to show their gratitude by helping onward the reforms of their own times, by spreading the light of freedom and truth still wider. The debt that each generation owes to the past it must pay to the future" (as cited in Rosen, 2006, pp. 344).

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“I fear for the women’s movement falling into precisely the same trap as did our foremothers, the suffragists: creating a bourgeois feminist movement that never quite dared enough, never questioned enough, never really reached out beyond its own class and race” –Robin Morgan
(as cited in Rosen, 2006, pp. 343).